

Did Jesus Indicate He Was God to the Rich Young Man?

by Servetus the Evangelical

Many people know about Jesus saying to a rich young man, “It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter the kingdom of God” (Mark 10.25). The man illicitly made this remark by addressing him as “Good Teacher” (v. 17). Jesus replied, “Why do you call me good? No one is good except God alone” (v. 18).

In the past, church fathers and many subsequent traditionalist Christians have insisted that Jesus here implied that he was God. Their obvious reasoning was that Jesus is good, no one is good except God, therefore Jesus must be God. Before we examine this faulty reasoning, we should briefly consider Matthew’s account.

All three synoptists relate this encounter between Jesus and the rich young man. But Matthew records Jesus’ response differently as follows: “Why are you asking Me about what is good? There is only One who is good” (Matthew 19.17).

The apparent discrepancy in these accounts is probably attributed to Mark and Luke providing the *ipsissima verba* (exact words) whereas Matthew has typically editorialized Jesus’ saying to clarify a potential misunderstanding about Jesus’ sinlessness. Regardless, we are most concerned with the christological implications of Jesus’ remark.

It is important to ask what Jesus’ purpose was in answering the man’s question. It could not have been to identify himself as God. That would have been irrelevant to the question. Neb Stonehouse states outright, “Jesus is not occupied here with questions of Christology.” Even John Calvin, who never passed up an opportunity to defend Christ’s supposed deity, admits that Jesus “is not therefore affirming the essence of His deity.”

During the early and mid-20th century, Princeton Professor B.B. Warfield was one of America’s leading conservative and staunchly Trinitarian theologians. He wrote what many conservative Christian scholars have regarded as a classic treatment of Jesus’ remark to the rich young man recorded in Mark 10.18 and Luke 18.19. He asserts, “The question of the relation of Jesus to this God does not emerge: there is equally no denial that He is God, and no affirmation that He is God.” Warfield quotes five other biblical scholars of his time who held the same view. One of them was Presbyterian J.A. Alexander, whose father founded Princeton Theological Seminary. Alexander says of this passage, “The goodness of our Lord Himself and His divinity are then not at all in question, and are consequently neither affirmed nor denied.”

In order to understand this, Jesus’ reply should be treated in accordance with his religious culture. To do otherwise is to interpret it apart from this context. So, what was Jesus trying to teach this man regarding their common religious culture?

In the Old Testament (OT), Judaism, and especially Hellenistic theism, only God was recognized as “good” in an *absolute* sense. Humans were called “good” only in a *derived* sense, with God being recognized as the Source of their goodness. Characterizing God as perfectly good was thought to bring honor to him. Accordingly, Jesus’ use of “good” has nothing to do with distinguishing moral differences between humans.

The New Testament (NT) often describes Jesus as “holy.” Yet those who overcome the Antichrist will sing a song, saying of God the Father, “O Lord God, the Almighty;... You alone art holy” (Revelation 15.3-4). They apparently mean this in an absolute sense, since Jesus’ holiness is derived from God the Father.

Actually, Jesus was contrasting the rich man's lack of goodness with the absolute perfect goodness of God. This man thought he was good; yet he recognized that Jesus was good, too. Jesus exposed the man's lack of goodness, to which he was blind, when Jesus said to him, "If you want to be perfect, go, sell your possessions and give to the poor,... Then come, follow me" (Matthew 19.21 NIV). If the man would have done that, he would have fulfilled the commandment to love your neighbor as yourself (Leviticus 19.18). Matthew adds that Jesus explained "good" by quoting some Ten Commandments, ending with this catchall precept (Matthew 19.19).

In saying that God "alone" is good, Jesus was not denying his own sinlessness or righteousness. But he was implying that his righteousness was in some respect less than that of God his Father. Warfield quotes H.R. Mackintosh approvingly, who well explains, "What Jesus disclaims, rather, is *God's* perfect goodness. None but God is good with a goodness unchanging and eternal;... Jesus, on the contrary, learnt obedience by the things which He suffered, being tempted in all points like as we are (Hebrews 5.8; 4.15).... the holiness of Jesus, as displayed in the record of His life, is no automatic effect of a metaphysical substance, but in its perfected form the fruit of continuous moral volition pervaded and sustained by the Spirit." Indeed, Jesus underwent a maturing process in attaining goodness (Luke 2.40, 52), whereas it is assumed that God has always been perfectly good.

In conclusion, Jesus did not here identify himself as God. Rather, this episode attests that only the Father is God and that he alone possesses an unrivaled and absolutely perfect goodness. Traditionalist Raymond E. Brown explains this encounter, "A frequent patristic interpretation is that Jesus is trying to lead the man to a perception of his [Jesus'] divinity,... One cannot but feel that such an exegesis is motivated by an apologetic concern for protecting the doctrine of the divinity of Jesus. Other interpreters stress that Jesus is trying to direct attention away from himself to his Father. This is undoubtedly true, but it should not disguise the fact that this text strongly distinguishes between Jesus and God, and that a description that Jesus rejects is applicable to God. From this text one would never suspect that the evangelist thought of Jesus as God." And the same must be said of Jesus and all those Jews who heard him answer the rich young man.